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Prairie View A&M student fights for voting poll site on campus

PLAINTIFF'S
EXHIBIT

137

6-8 minutes

A Prairie View A&M University student leader is calling on officials to add a campus polling place to remedy what she and a civil rights leader described as decades of voter suppression.

Priscilla Barbour, president of the Student Government Association at the historically black university, sent a letter to Texas Secretary of State John Steen and Waller County Registrar Robyn German last week requesting that action be taken by Oct. 1. Barbour says students' voting rights are being violated because the nearest polling location is more than a mile away.

The Oct. 1 first deadline, she said, would allow time to make students aware of the new polling place before the November elections.

Barbour, a senior, hopes her request will end a battle that former Prairie View students have failed to win over the years.

"We've always had problems," said Barbour, who is active with the Texas League of Young Voters. "Voting is supposed to be something that's convenient, something you have the right to do without walking a great distance or standing in line."

The political science major said students were forced during last year's general election to wait in a long line to vote at the polling location at the local community center.

The city of Prairie View accommodates students by placing a polling location on campus, but Waller County officials have refused to do the same, she said.

German, the county's new registrar, could not be reached for comment Wednesday. Steen's spokeswoman, Alicia Pierce, said Steen was drafting a letter to German.

"We don't generally determine polling locations," Pierce said. "That decision is made at the county level, but the secretary is willing to meet with Miss Barbour. We'll be glad to work with her."

Gary Bledsoe, president of the NAACP state chapter, said Waller County has a history of voter intimidation and suppression of black voters.

Repeated complaints

The lack of polling places on campus, lost voter registration applications and problems with ballot boxes are among the many voting issues that have come up time and again in the county, he said.

"Students are entitled to a voting poll on campus," Bledsoe said. "They have been fighting for one for many years. It's a righteous request."

Barbour's action follows a recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling that struck down a key provision in the Voting Rights Act. The law protects minority voters from discrimination at the polls and, until June, required nine states with a discriminatory history, including Texas, to get federal approval before making changes to election laws.

The ruling gave Texas and other states the green light to push through voter ID laws, which civil rights leaders say will inhibit minority voting.

Prairie View has been at the center of voting right issues as far back as the 1970s, when the U.S. attorney general filed action against Waller County and state officials for the use a questionnaire that denied Prairie View students the right to vote.

In 1992, 19 students were indicted for improperly voting, which led to a Supreme Court ruling that authorized students to register and vote in communities where they live.

The NAACP and four students filed a federal lawsuit in 2004 after the county district attorney tried to enforce residency requirements that would keep students from voting. Another suit was filed around the same time after county officials shortened the early voting period at the campus without Justice Department approval.

The district attorney rescinded his action as part of a settlement and county officials added an extra early voting day on campus after being questioned by the Justice Department.

Previous protest

In 2008, nearly 1,000 Prairie View students marched in protest of the lack of an early voting place on campus. The county, citing budget concerns, reduced the number of early voting polling sites from six to one, requiring students to walk miles to the polling location. The Justice Department instructed county officials to add three polling sites.

Barbour said she was apprehensive about sending her letters but figured she had nothing to lose.

"Even if nothing's accomplished, now the tone is set," she said. "I'm not the first to tackle the issue and I'm sure I won't be the last. This gives students a chance to be knowledgeable and take a stand."